FOCUS ON FATHERING: A PROJECT OF THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSION OF QUEENSLAND

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Introduction

The Children's Commission of Queensland was established in 1996. It was the first independent commission for children established anywhere in Australia, although South Australia had established their Children's Interests Bureau in 1984. The Commission aims to promote the well-being of children and young people in Queensland.

The Children's Commission is aware of the body of research which demonstrates the link between strong familial relationships and productive and fulfilling adult citizenship, and hence has a strong interest in parenting issues. As society undergoes rapid change, we are seeing an increasing recognition of: the importance of healthy relationships; the effects of domestic and family violence on children, either as witnesses or victims, and; the costs to men, children, families and society of problematic relationships.

Changes in gender relationships have led to a questioning of what it is to be a man, and a father, in contemporary Australia. News reports all too frequently reveal the tragic consequences of desperate men reacting violently to the breakdown of relationships.

Given these circumstances, the relationships between men and their children are of special interest to the Children's Commission. Throughout this year, we are undertaking a specific initiative to raise awareness and inform public debate on contemporary fathering issues, and to promote appropriate fathering and positive fathering skills.

This paper will provide a brief introduction to the Children's Commission and an overview of our Focus on Fathering Project.

Before I talk about the role of the Commission, I would like to provide you with some very brief details of our constituents, that is Queensland's children and young people.

Our clients

There are approximately 870,000 Queensland residents aged between 0 and 17 years[1]. This number constitutes 26.2 per cent (ABS 1999), or just over a quarter, of the total population of the State. Australia wide, children make up 25.4 per cent of the population (ABS 1999).

I am sorry that I am not able to give you the number of children and young people up to the age of 18 years, which is the legal age of majority in Queensland. Data on children and young people are organised by different age groupings for different purposes and by different organisations. The lack of uniform definitions and age groupings makes it difficult to quantify

[1] Calculated from ABS, *1996 Census of Population and Housing* (unpublished data) cited in

or compare matters affecting children and young people and is one of the issues that the Commission would like to see eventually addressed across jurisdictions.

The proportion of children within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is much higher than the overall proportion of children in the State, and stands at 46.9 per cent (ABS 1996). This disproportionate, in today's terms, number of children to adults has implications in many areas, from housing to mentoring, and creates a different dynamic from that of the rest of the State's population. Within the Indigenous community, it is more powerful and pronounced than the bulge produced by the post war baby boom.

As you are no doubt aware, the proportion of children in the population overall is decreasing. The average number of children in Australian families now stands at 1.7. This low birth rate, combined with the ageing of the post war cohort and an increased life expectancy, means that children will constitute a smaller proportion of the population in the future, predicted to fall to 21.8 per cent [2] by 2025. This decrease will introduce a new range of social issues and pressures over time for both adults and children.

Although children as a proportion of the State's population will fall, the actual number of children in Queensland is predicted to increase by 30.5 per cent (Edgar 1999) due to the projected increase in the State's overall population from interstate and overseas migration as well as births. This is the highest projected percentage change in the number of children for any state.

The Children's Commission of Queensland

The establishment of the Commission in 1996 was a formal recognition by the Parliament of Queensland that adults' and children's interests are not always the same. Since 1979, the International Year of the Child, and the year in which work on the Convention on the Rights of the Child began, children's rights have been receiving more attention throughout the world. There has been greater recognition that:

- children and young people are wholly dependent upon the goodwill of adults;
- they must generally rely on adults to voice their concerns; and
- they are without political impact (Western Australian Children's Advisory Council undated).

The greater recognition of children as a separate entity, their need for special consideration, and their vulnerability have resulted in offices for children being established in a number of countries or states throughout the world.

Norway was the first, establishing a children's ombudsman in 1981. Others, including Sweden, Israel, Germany, Guatemala, Austria, British Columbia and Alberta in Canada, New Zealand, New South Wales and Tasmania, have established a children's commission or a specialised children's office.

Although we have a long way to go, I am pleased that Queensland, which frequently wears the label of being behind the times on social matters, is amongst those in the forefront of promoting an awareness of the issues affecting its children and young people, providing them with an opportunity to be listened to, and protecting their rights.

In my role as Queensland's Children's Commissioner I am charged with – amongst other things – fostering a community culture that focuses on children and young people's interests, their needs, rights and responsibilities.

[2] Source: Calculated from: ABS, *Australian Social Trends,* 1997, 41002.0 and *Australian Demographic*

The Children's Commission endeavours to promote translation into practice of the principles contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) - ratified by the Australian Government in 1991 – through liaison with government and non-government agencies providing services to children. Significantly, the primacy of the family unit is enshrined in the UNCROC, where Article 18 states:

1. *States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.*

2. *For the purposes of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States parties shall render the appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for which they are eligible.*

The principles expressed in this Article, along with an awareness of the importance of the family on a child's development, provide the basis for the Commission's commitment to parenting issues. By enhancing the quality of parenting and family life, there is a greater chance that children will enjoy a safe and supportive family environment in which to grow and thrive.

The place of parents

It is generally accepted that early childhood experiences have powerful effects on the development of children's physical, intellectual and emotional abilities. Although there is some debate about how deterministic these effects are, it is also accepted that early experiences have the capacity to extend their influence across the life span.

When children inhabit an environment that is responsive and supportive, and provides the secure base and safe haven they need to explore the world (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978) they are equipped with one of the pre-requisites for their future optimal emotional functioning.

If the family environment continues to be cohesive and supportive, displaying emotional sensitivity, appropriate role modelling, behavioural boundaries, constructive communication styles and shared affect throughout childhood and young adulthood, the person is much more likely to experience success in a range of areas in life. They are more likely to be able to establish and maintain successful interpersonal relationships (Hazan & Shaver 1987), less likely to be involved in crime (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1990), be better parents, experience better mental and physical health (Blum & Mann Rinehart 1997), and achieve better academically (Linver & Silberg 1997) than individuals whose environment does not display these qualities.

Most families would find it difficult to display all these qualities consistently, as daily stresses and major life events impact on the functioning capacity of families and individuals within them. Children are generally resilient to lapses in family functioning if they have a sound base and if the difficulties are infrequent and not severe or prolonged.

Abusive and neglectful families are not able to offer their children this type of environment and, consequently, this type of resilience is not fostered. The causes of child abuse and neglect are generally viewed as stemming from a range of factors operating in the individual's social and emotional environment.

Belsky and Vondra (1989) built on previous ecological–systems perspectives and proposed that adequate parenting had its foundation in three major sources: the parents' own developmental history and resultant personal psychological resources; characteristics of the family and the child; and contextual sources of stress and support.

They found that parental personality is the most influential factor on parenting, because it also influences the person's choice of marital partner, the quality of the marital relationship and the amount of social support they are offered (Hazan & Shaver 1987). It is not so much the inappropriate, inadequate or abusive nurturing experiences that prevent parents from being able to break the cycle of abuse and neglect, but their unacknowledged and unresolved feelings about them.

Parent education programs

Parent education usually describes programs that are specifically designed to directly inform parents about various aspects of child development and or parenting. However, it is important to also recognise the value of more general education in parents' ability to parent.

It is known that the parents' educational level is a primary determinant of how much education their children receive and how well they do at school (Lynch as cited in Danziger & Waldfogel 2000). It has also been shown, however, that beyond formal education, investments in parents' human capital raises not only their workplace productivity, but also makes them better teachers of children (Lynch as cited in Danziger & Waldfogel 2000).

This needs to be kept in mind when early intervention programs for children are designed as programs that focus only on the education and training of the child will generally be ineffective, if similar investments are not made in the parents (Lynch as cited in Danziger & Waldfogel 2000). Programs that help parents acquire or enhance any of the factors identified as mediating factors, or help them cope with or eliminate risk factors, even if they are not classified under the heading of 'parent education', increase the capacity for improved individual, and hence family functioning.

These include programs or training that enhance competency in social skills, decision making, communication, relationships, and coping, or reduce social isolation and alcohol or drug abuse. As an important strategy for fostering children's well-being, such programs are of great interest to the Children's Commission.

Programs that are designated specifically as parenting programs take on diverse forms and target a range of audiences. Frequently programs are described as primary, secondary of tertiary level programs depending on the target audience. To some degree, however, these divisions seem unnecessarily artificial as programs can have a range of functions and applications and do not easily classify this way.

The cost of any educational program designed to enhance family functioning is always going to be a consideration, but the cost of not providing it also needs to be assessed. Although families operate at various levels of effectiveness, they are still one of the most efficient and effective units in society, in all but the most extreme cases. It would be interesting to determine the value of the functional family unit to the Gross National Product (GNP).

There have been studies that have tried to calculate the cost of social issues, such as child abuse, and the value of elements, such as the contribution of mothers to the family, but nothing that assesses the value of overall family functionality. That is, the value of the family unit that is able to raise children who are competent socially, emotionally, intellectually, and able to be an asset rather than a liability to their community, and provide a healthy role model for future generations.

Until recently, parenting programs generally addressed the mothering role of parenting. Some of the more generic programs offered information and insights into effective parenting that could be employed by both mothers and fathers, but the different roles that fathers play were largely unacknowledged. Specialised support programs for fathers at the secondary and tertiary level, were almost non-existent as were programs for incarcerated, indigenous or other minority fathers.

It is only in recent years that men's issues have started to gain legitimacy and their parenting role, beyond their financial contributions, taken seriously. The benefits of health family relationships, not just mother child relationships, are now being identified, as are the costs of men not coping with family life.

There are now a range of programs throughout Queensland that are addressing fathering issues. The Children's Commission's Focus on Fathering Project aims to increase our understanding of fathering and will highlight the importance of providing fathering education and support programs, as well as actively valuing the role that fathers play in children's lives, particularly at this time when an increasing number of children are growing up without a consistent male figure in their lives.

Focus on Fathering Project

The Children's Commission has based its Focus on Fathering Project on an awareness of the need for a multistrategy approach. The project has a strong parent education focus, but also seeks to expand the existing knowledge base around fathering issues.

As a primary prevention program, the Children's Commission is in the process of establishing partnerships to undertake collaborative activities aimed at raising community awareness of fathering and increasing community understanding of the complexity of the issues around being a father in Queensland today. Currently we are launching a competition for school children which will explore their perceptions and experiences of their father(s) or those they consider to take a fathering role in their lives. This is a preventative strategy designed to raise community awareness of positive fathering behaviours. It is also anticipated that it could serve as an opportunity for meaningful conversations between the children involved and their fathers or father figures.

An exciting aspect of this project has evolved from a partnership established with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (ATSIAB). The Commission had already held discussions with the Department of Corrective Services regarding the impact on the child of incarceration of a parent. Along with ATSIAB, we are also concerned at the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in prison. The Board and the Commission are currently collaborating to develop and deliver on a trial basis a fathering program for indigenous male prisoners at a correctional centre in North Queensland. This tertiary prevention program is the focus of the third paper in the symposium today.

The Children's Commission of Queensland is interested in furthering knowledge about fathering in the research and the general community. The Commission considered two recent projects carefully when scoping its own Focus on Fathering project. The research undertaken by Professor Graeme Russell and his colleagues under the Men's Role in Parenting Project published in the report "Fitting Fathers into Families" (Department of Family and Community Services 1999) provided a significant insight into men and the fatherhood role in contemporary Australia. However, it did not include respondents from Queensland, and only 1.3 per cent of the sample were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island origin. The Children's Commission of Queensland believes that factors such as the size of our state and concomitant distance and isolation issues mean that results for Queensland could well differ from the data cited above.

New Zealand research (Julian 1999) included Maori and Pacific Island respondents. However, the report of this research does not discuss any differences in responses related to ethnicity. The Commission is concerned about the appropriateness of existing research in helping us understand fathering from an indigenous perspective. We feel that it is imperative that data on indigenous issues, in the context of investigating fathering roles and responsibilities, be collected in order to inform future endeavours to support fathers, families and children in these communities.

The Children's Commission does not provide programs itself, but has undertaken and will update a scan of fathering programs currently offered in Queensland. This has indicated a paucity of programs targeted specifically at men as fathers. Ten have been identified so far, mostly primary and secondary level programs; two of these are part of the Federal Government Men's Role in Parenting Project.

The Commission believes that practices can be more effective if informed by current research, and conducts forums to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. As part of the Focus on Fathering Project, later in the year the Children's Commission plans to conduct forums and workshops which link researchers with practitioners, policy makers and program developers to explore ways of evaluating fathering programs in the light of the complexity of the above factors.

Conclusion

The Children's Commission's role in promoting the well-being of children and young people in Queensland means that we are interested in parenting and parenting programs. Our Focus on Fathering Project this year aims to increase knowledge about Australian men as parents, support them in this capacity and promote public awareness of the role fathers can play in ensuring the well-being of children.

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